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For Our Child-Serving Community*

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New Family Court to Help DC Kids

A new Family Court was established in January by Congress for the District of Columbia to provide better decisions, better services, and better results for abused and neglected DC children. CFSA Director Olivia A. Golden hailed the new plan for the court as dovetailing with the strategic goals and internal reforms she has instituted since she assumed her post last summer. "It means that abused and neglected children in the District will have more of a chance to grow up in a permanent, loving family, rather than drifting in temporary settings," she said. "This is what children need, and it is also what federal and DC law require."

Golden praised House Majority Whip Tom Delay (R-TX), Rep. Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-DC), D.C. Superior Court Chief Judge Rufus King and the presiding judge of the Superior Court's family division, Judge Lee Satterfield, for their leadership in working with Mayor Anthony A. Williams on a bipartisan formula for the Family Court. The legislation will consolidate the 3,600 family cases now spread over 59 judges under 15 full-time judges. The new system sets a minimum five-year term for each new Family Court judge, assuring that all will be knowledgeable about the system and its resources and that CFSA attorneys and social workers will be better able to anticipate each judge's needs.

The volume of court activity is very great: some 1,300 to 1,500 hearings are scheduled on a monthly basis, most of them case-review hearings. "We see the Family Court judges as partners with CFSA in guaranteeing a comprehensive approach to every child's best interests," Golden said. "We know they will share our goal of recruiting and retaining expert social workers and loving foster homes, expediting permanency for every child, and using neighborhood-based resource to the utmost."

CFSA Takes New Approach to Placing Children

The Community Services Administration at CFSA has taken a new approach to placing children while seeking to ensure quality placement services. Current numbers show that since September 2001, all 157 children previously placed in respite care facilities have been moved into appropriate foster care settings.

When children are at risk or when attempts to maintain them in a family setting have failed, the Placement staff has primary responsibility for identifying appropriate foster care locations. Placement options include traditional foster care, therapeutic care, residential sites and group home care.

"We have made progress in pursuing our strategic goal of placing each child in the best possible situation for that particular child," said Debra Usher, Deputy Director for Community Programs. Nationally recognized for her expertise in kinship care and community partnerships, Ms. Usher also oversees foster and adoptive parent recruitment, training and supportive services and child placement.

"First, we assess the child's immediate needs. We saw that staff needed higher awareness of the need to place children under age eight into foster homes rather than group homes. With the support of CFSA's recruitment and licensing and monitoring staff we can continue to ensure safe quality placement, which is our top priority. We are also working hard to complete these placements within four hours, minimizing any overnight stays at CFSA's intake processing center," she said.

The Placement Services Unit has been improving use of existing resources, first by: identifying additional vacancies within foster homes, then working with FACES (CFSA's child and family information system) to give the staff daily updates on vacancy information, and finally reviewing contracts and

comparing them to children's needs, to make sure those needs are being met.

"It's nice to know that progress is being made in the process for placing children," said Barbara Collins, President of the DC Metropolitan Foster and Adoptive Parents Association. "The steps the agency is making are good, but most importantly, the automated system (FACES) is the key way to expedite the placement of children and maximize the use of foster home vacancies."

The Healthy Families/Thriving Communities Collaboratives are important partners. They will provide training sites for foster parent pre-service and in-service training. Pre-service training will begin in February at the East River Collaborative site. In addition, Dona Farris Jenkins, coordinator of the My Community, My Children Foster Care Reform Initiative, is meeting with all collaborative directors on their levels of participation, with an eye toward recruiting additional foster and adoptive homes in their areas. The Initiative partners provide support services to foster and adoptive parents in their communities.

New Ombudsman Named to Support Parents

Carolyn Russell-Lander has been appointed CFSA's new Ombudsman. A veteran of both public and private child welfare systems since 1968, Ms. Lander has been a caseworker in many capacities, including intake and traditional and therapeutic foster care as well as in-service training and advocating on behalf of foster parents.

Why an Ombudsman? "It is the Ombudsman office's goal to promote change that improves the effectiveness, efficiency and dignity of the services provided to Foster/ Adoptive and Kinship parents," Ms. Lander said.

The Ombudsman assists foster, adoptive/kinship parents with concerns, complaints or questions about agency services and provides support in other areas affecting immediate care. These may include supporting parental and/or children's rights and trying to correct problems by identifying appropriate services.

The office gives priority to questions involving disruption of a child's placement, the closing of a home or other concerns that threaten the health, safety or well-being of a foster child.

The Ombudsman can be reached at 202-727-2426.